

Anarchism and the Workers' Unions

Fernand Pelloutier

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Introduction

Fernand Pelloutier (1867-1901), educated through the religious schools and then Saint-Nazaire College, had turned his back on the bourgeoisie to throw in his lot with the people. At a very early age he embarked upon a career in journalism. He joined the Parti ouvrier français (French Workers' Party) and then, in 1892, he was sent by the Saint-Nazaire and Nantes Bourses du Travail as their delegate to a socialist congress at which – most unusually for such a setting – he won acceptance for the principle of the general strike. At the beginning of 1893, he moved to Paris. It was not long before he had parted company from the marxists to embrace libertarian ideas. In a "Letter to the Anarchists," he wrote "We are (. . .) what they [the politicians] are not – full-time rebels, truly godless men, without master or homeland, incorrigible enemies of all despotism, moral or collective, that is to say, of laws and dictatorships, including that of the proletariat."

But at the same time, Pelloutier was urging anarchists to get actively involved in the labour movement. In 1895 he was appointed secretary of the Federation of Bourses du Travail and gave unstintingly of himself in that capacity. In 1897, he launched a monthly review of social economy L'Ouvrier des Deux-Mondes, seeing to the typesetting personally.

Pelloutier looked upon the Bourses du Travail as the very paragon of labour organization, the model closest to the people at the grassroots. He saw in them the embryo of the "free association of producers" to which Bakunin had looked forward, as well as the embryo of the workers' Commune, that essential structure of the coming society. Succumbing to an untimely death as a result of incurable illness, he left behind a posthumous volume, that classic work on revolutionary syndicalism, *Histoire des Bourses du Travail*.

ANARCHISM AND THE WORKERS UNIONS¹

Just as some workers of my acquaintance, for all that they are fed up with parliamentary socialism, are loath to confess their libertarian socialism, because, as they see it, anarchy boils down to the individual recourse to dynamite, so I know a number of anarchists who, as a result of a once well-founded prejudice, steer well clear of the trade unions, and, if need be, oppose them, on the grounds that that institution has been, for a time, a downright nursery for would-be deputies. In Saint-Etienne, for example, (and I have this from a reliable source), the members of the trade unions venerate Ravachol: none of them, however, dares declare himself an anarchist, for fear that he might appear to be turning away from working towards collective rebellion and opting for isolated rebellion in its place. Elsewhere, by contrast, in Paris, Amiens, Marseilles, Roanne and a hundred other towns, anarchists admire the new spirit by which the trade unions have been moved these past two years, yet do not dare to venture into that revolutionary field to ensure that the good seed sown by harsh experience germinates. And, between these men, emancipated almost to the same extent, intellectually connected by a shared objective and by a perception here and a conviction there, regarding the necessity of a violent uprising, there is a lingering mistrust which keeps the former distant from comrades held to be systematically hostile to all concerted action, and the latter from a form of combination in which, they persist in believing, alienation of the freedom of the individual is still obligatory.

¹ Written on October 20, 1895: printed in *Les Temps nouveaux* of November 2-8, 1895.

However, the rapprochement begun in a few large industrial or manufacturing centres is relentlessly spreading. A comrade from Roanne only recently indicated to readers of *Les Temps nouveaux* that not only have that city's anarchists at last joined the trades bodies, but that they have gained a moral authority there of real service to propaganda by virtue of the vigour and passion of their proselytisation. What we have learned regarding the trade unions of Roanne, I might repeat relative to many trade unions in Algiers, Toulouse, Paris, Beauvais, Toulon, etc., where, worn down by libertarian propaganda, they are today studying teachings which yesterday, under Marxist influence, they refused even to hear tell of. Now, analysing the grounds behind this rapprochement, which would so recently have seemed impossible, and setting out the stages through which it has proceeded, amounts to dispelling the remains of the distrust that thwarts revolutionary unity and spells ruin for statist socialism, which has turned into the doctrinal form of inadmissible appetites. At one point the trade unions were ready (and – this is a guarantee against any back-sliding – ready because they had come to their own conclusion, in spite of counsels which previously they had so respectfully heeded) to withdraw from all truck with the so-called social laws: that point coincided with the implementation of the first of the reforms which they had been promised over a period of four years would work wonders.

So often had they been told: "Patience! We will see to it that your work hours are so regulated that you will have the leisure and study time without which you would be perpetually slaves" that they were transfixated in expectation of that reform, so to speak, over a period of several years and distracted from the aim of revolution. But once they had been awarded the law governing female and child labour, what did they find? That their wives' pay was cut, along with their children's and their own, in keeping with the cut in working hours, and there were strikes and lock-outs in Paris, Amiens and the Ardeche, out-work became more widespread, or the sweating system, or indeed industrialists' recourse to ingenious combinations (swing shifts, shift work) simultaneously circumvented the law and worsened working conditions. In the end, implementation of the law of November 2, 1892 had such an impact that female and male workers called and are calling still for it to be repealed.

What was the provenance of such a reversal? The trade unions hastened to look for an explanation: but, their faith in legislation being too recently acquired to be seriously stricken, too ignorant of social economy to probe beyond the tangible causes, they believed (in that the cuts in working hours had determined the cuts in pay) that the law would be flawless if regulation of labour costs could be added to regulation of hours.

But the hour of disappointment had finally come. The promises which had made for reformist socialism's power now yielded to the practice, which would spell its ruination. Fresh laws arose, designed either to see that the producer was paid better or to cater for his old age. But then the unions noticed (and it is primarily to the women that the credit for this discovery, crucial to socialism's evolution, must go) that the items for which they were paid most as producers were sold to them at increasingly high cost as consumers, and that as wage rates rose, so too the cost of bread, wine, meat, housing, furniture – in short, all of life's essential needs – rose too: and they noticed too (and this was spelled out formally at the recent Limoges congress) that in the last analysis, retirement pensions are still funded out of levies upon wages. And this lesson of experience, a lesson more instructive to them than the masterly analysis of the impact of taxation

² The reference is probably to Chapter III of *Le Systeme des contradictions economiques* (1846) and perhaps also to Chapter III of *La Theorie de l'impôt* (1861).

devised by Proudhon² or taught by the International and indeed accepted and incorporated into the collectivist programs of thirteen years ago – while it was not as yet enough to persuade them that attempts to reduce pauperism in an economic context where everything conspires to add to it are like trying to confine a liquid on a flat surface, at least impressed upon their minds a rough conclusion to the effect that social legislation may not be quite the panacea they had been told it would be.

However, that lesson would not have been enough to inspire the rapid evolution in them of which we speak, had not the socialist schools themselves been bent upon investing them with a distaste for politics. For a long time the trade unions reckoned that the socialist party's weakness, or rather, the weakness of the proletariat had been primarily, and maybe even exclusively attributable to divisions among the politicians. The moment that Citizen X fell out with Citizen Z, or the "bespectacled Torquemada," hitherto damned by Clovis Hugues and Ferroul³, and some prima donna from what Lafargue⁴ has called the "Federation of Socialist Unreliables," the trade unions would be split down the middle, and if it came to the mounting of some concerted action like a May Day demonstration, say, they would find their members splitting into five, six or ten factions, pulling in different directions in obedience to their leaders' watchwords. This gave them pause for thought, and mistaking the effect for the cause, they expended what could be described as immeasurable-energy on efforts to resolve this insoluble problem of socialist unity.⁵ Ah, no one who has not lived among the trade unions can have any conception of the efforts made to make a reality of that chimera! Agendas, deliberations, manifestoes: everything, but everything was tried, but found wanting: even as agreement seemed to have been reached, or when the discussions were being wound up, more as a result of weariness than of conviction, one word would fan the spark: Guesdists, Blanquists, die-hards and Broussists would jump angrily to their feet to exchange insults and take issue with this Guesde, Vaillant and Brousse, and this fresh outbreak of fighting would drag on for weeks, only to flare up again when scarcely it had finished.

In this world, everything comes to an end. Wearying of their growing weakness and their pointless endeavours to reconcile politics, which has to do primarily with individual interests, with economics, which has to do with the interests of society, the trade unions eventually came to understand (better late than never) that the divisions in their own ranks had a loftier cause than the division among the politicians, and that both of these proceeded from . . . politics. At which point, emboldened by the manifest ineffectuality of "social" legislation, by the treachery of certain elected socialists (some of whom gave their backing to the Bercy big business interest), by the lamentable results of interference by deputies or town councillors in strikes, notably the omnibus strike, by the hostility shown towards the general strike by newspapers and men

³ Clovis Hugues (1851#1907), French politician and poet: Ernest Ferroul (1853-1921), physician, socialist mayor and deputy for Narbonne.

⁴ Paul Lafargue (1842-1911), born in Cuba of French parents, student of medicine, initially a Proudhonian libertarian, then disciple and son-in-law of Karl Marx, marrying his daughter Laura: member of the International: actively involved in the Commune: Karl Marx's delegate to Spain, designated to combat Bakunin's supporters there: amnestied in 1880: elected deputy in 1891, he joined Jules Guesde in the launching of the Parti Ouvrier français: author of *The Right to be Lazy*, a pamphlet of somewhat libertarian panache. He committed suicide alongside his wife on November 26, 1911 "pre-empting a pitiless old age."

⁵ On socialist unity, see Daniel Guerin's introduction to a forthcoming edition of Rosa Luxemburg's *Le Socialisme en France* (1898#1912): Edouard Vaillant (1840-1915), one of the greatest of French revolutionaries, a Blanquist to begin with, a member of the Commune of 1871, condemned to death, then amnestied. Wound up supporting the "Sacred Union."

whose entire policy consists of building or finding themselves a stepping stone towards their 25 francs and sash, the trade unions decided that from now on political agitations would be none of their concern, that all discussion, other than economic, would be ruthlessly excluded from their program of study and that they would devote themselves whole-heartedly to resisting capital. Recent instances have shown how quickly the trade unions have taken to this slant!

Yet the rumour of this about-turn had been vindicated. The new watchword "No more politicking!" had spread through the workshops. A number of union members deserted the churches devoted to the cult of electioneering. So the trade union terrain seemed to some anarchists ripe to receive and nurture their doctrine, and came to the aid of those who, freed at last of parliamentary tutelage, now strove to focus their attention and that of their comrades upon the study of economic laws.

This entry into the trade union of some libertarians made a considerable impact. For one thing, it taught the masses the true meaning of anarchism, a doctrine which, in order to make headway can very readily, let us say it again, manage without the individual dynamiter: and, through a natural linkage of ideas, it showed union members what this trades organization of which they had previously had only the narrowest conception is and may yet become.

Nobody believes or expects that the coming revolution, however formidable it should be, will realise unadulterated anarchist communism. By virtue of the fact that it will erupt, no doubt, before the work of anarchist education has been completed, men will not be quite mature enough to organise themselves absolutely without assistance, and for a long time yet the demands of caprice will stifle the voice of reason in them. As a result (and this seems a good time to spell it out), while we do preach perfect communism, it is not in the certainty or expectation of communism's being the social form of the future: it is in order to further men's education, and round it off as completely as possible, so that, by the time that the day of conflagration comes, they will have attained maximum emancipation. But must the transitional state to be endured necessarily or inevitably be the collectivist jail?⁶ Might it not consist of libertarian organization confined to the needs of production and consumption alone, with all political institutions having been done away with? Such is the problem with which many minds have – rightly – been grappling for many a long year.

Now, what is the trade union? An association which one is free to join or quit, one without a president, with no officials other than a secretary and a treasurer subject to instant revocation, of men who study and debate kindred professional concerns. And who are these men? Producers, the very same who create all public wealth. Do they await the approval of the law before they come together, reach agreement and act? No: as far as they are concerned, lawful constitution is merely an amusing means of making revolutionary propaganda under government guarantee, and anyway, how many of them do not and will not ever figure in the unions' formal annual returns?

Do they use the parliamentary mechanism in order to arrive at their resolutions? Not any more: they hold discussions and the most widely-held view has the force of law, but it is a law without sanction, observed precisely because it is subject to the endorsement of the individual, except, of course, when it comes to resisting the employers. Finally, while they appoint a chairman, a delegated supervisor, for every session, this is not now the result of habit, for, once appointed, that chairman is utterly overlooked and himself frequently forgets the powers vested in him by

⁶ By this term, Pelloutier means State socialism.

his comrades. As a laboratory of economic struggles, detached from election contests, favouring the general strike with all that that implies, governing itself along anarchic lines, the trade union is thus the simultaneously revolutionary and libertarian organization that alone will be able to counter and successfully reduce the noxious influence of the collectivist politicians. Suppose now that, on the day the revolution breaks out, virtually every single producer is organised into the unions: will these not represent, ready to step into the shoes of the present organisation, a quasi-libertarian organization, in fact suppressing all political power, an organisation whose every part, being master of the instruments of production, would settle all of its affairs for itself, in sovereign fashion and through the freely given consent of its members? And would this not amount to the "free association of free producers?"

To be sure, there are many objections: the federal agencies may turn into authorities: wily persons may come to govern the trade unions just the way the parliamentary socialists govern the political groupings: but such objections are only partly valid. In keeping with the spirit of the trade unions, the federal councils are merely half-way houses generated by the need to spread and make economic struggles more and more formidable, but which the success of the revolution would make redundant, and which, also, the groups from which they emanate monitor with too jealous an eye for them ever to successfully win a directorial authority. On the other hand, the permanent revocability of officials reduces their function and their profile to very little, and often indeed having done their duty is not enough for them to retain their comrades' confidence. Then again, trades organization is still only in the embryonic stages. Once rid of politicians' tyranny, it can stride out freely and, like the child learning to take his first steps, toddle along the road of independence. But who can say where a softly-softly approach and, rather more, the fruits of freedom will have carried them in ten years' time? It is up to libertarian socialists to commit all of their efforts to getting them there.

"The Federal Committee of the Bourses du Travail" – say the official minutes carried by the Bulletin de la Bourse de Narbonne – "has as its task the instruction of the people regarding the pointlessness of a revolution that would make do with the substitution of one State for another, even should this be a socialist State." That committee, states another minute due to appear in the Bulletin de la Bourse de Perpignan, "should strive to prepare an organization which, in the event of a transformation of society, may see to the operation of the economy through the free grouping and render any political institution superfluous. Its goal being the abolition of authority in any of its forms, its task is to accustom the workers to shrug off tutelage."

Thus, on the one hand, the "unionised" are today in a position to understand, study and receive libertarian teachings: on the other, anarchists need not fear that, in taking part in the corporative movement, they will be required to forswear their independence. The former are ready to accept and the latter can strengthen an organization whose resolutions are the products of free agreement: which, to borrow Grave's words (*La Societe future* p. 202) "has neither laws, nor statutes, nor regulations to which each individual may be obliged to submit on pain of some pre-determined penalty": which individuals are at liberty to quit as they see fit, except, let me repeat, when battle has been joined with the enemy: which, when all is said and done, may be a practical schooling in anarchism.

Let free men then enter the trade union, and let the propagation of their ideas prepare the workers, the artisans of wealth there to understand that they should regulate their affairs for themselves, and then, when the time comes, smash not only existing political forms, but any attempt to reconstitute a new power. That will show the authorities how well-founded was their

fear, posing as disdain, of "syndicalism," and how ephemeral their teaching, evaporated before it was even able to put down roots!

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